

SOMETIMES IT'S OKAY TO MEDDLE: OR, HOW TO ENCOURAGE FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS TO VISIT THE WRITING CENTER

Valerie Pexton
University of Wyoming
vapexton@uwyo.edu

When I was a kid, I loved the original Star Trek. Every time I heard “to boldly go where no man has gone before,” I got goosebumps. As I got older, besides realizing the ungrammatical nature of the construction (and the inherent sexism behind it), I began thinking about some of the show’s chief plot points; namely, the United Federation of Planets’ altruistic “Prime Directive” which prohibited interference with other civilizations. This directive, supposedly ironclad, was consistently violated by the Enterprise crew and usually on Captain Kirk’s orders. However, most of the violations were well intentioned and generally resulted in a positive outcome for whatever group of aliens was the object of the Enterprise’s meddling. This tendency of course only reinforced Kirk’s unstated philosophy that *interfering* in others’ affairs is sometimes the best way to get things done.

What do Star Trek, the Federation’s Prime Directive, or Captain Kirk have to do with writing centers? At the University of Wyoming’s Writing Center, where I have worked for the last ten years, it has become increasingly evident that one group could use a bit of meddling in their affairs—namely first-year students. While our surveys show that the need for writing center assistance remains steady, visits to our center by first-years have decreased by more than 25 percent over the last two years of available data. First-year enrollment fluctuated very little during this same time span and the course for which a large percentage of our students seek help, Freshman Composition, actually increased its offerings each semester. The decrease in visits we’ve witnessed, then, seems to be the result of choice or lack of knowledge about services, neither of which is something Captain Kirk would have accepted.

The reasons first-year students, especially those coming right out of high school, don’t come to our writing center for help are fairly well-known: they struggle to adjust to the pace of college coursework and often wait too long to get help; they think of extra help as something akin to special ed; they aren’t used to finding resources on their own and don’t always follow up on the information they *do* get; they don’t manage their time well and are unable to get to the Writing Center during open hours. This last reason is especially relevant to our center. Due to funding and staffing constraints, we are not open at night or on weekends—times students have strongly indicated they’d like to have available. However, even with all of these reasons in play, the decrease in first-year visits isn’t fully explained.

There are some trends on our campus I believe help explain the situation. First, the number of international students has greatly increased over the last several years. Between spring 2008 and spring 2010, there was a massive 43% increase in the number of international students attending the University of Wyoming. Secondly, the university has experienced a marked increase in students taking outreach courses (“Student Enrollment Continues to Grow at UW”). These two developments have had a significant impact on our operation. International students, unlike first-years, are very good at finding and using resources and outreach students make good use of the Online Writing Lab we provide. The increase in these two groups has inevitably led to an increase in appointments *made*, but we are unable to increase the number of available appointment slots. We are open Monday-Friday, 9:00 am-4:00 pm and have, at most, two people working at a time providing the traditional 30-minute session. This means we can serve roughly

20 students per day. We are unable to accommodate walk-ins except for the very beginning of a semester when students haven't yet begun to make appointments. By the second week of any given semester, our appointment book is full, and it stays that way for the rest of the term. First years often find themselves looking at an appointment book with no empty spaces. While it is impossible to know for sure, it appears that once these students cannot immediately get an appointment, they simply give up. Our center is consistently busy, and therefore successful, but in a strange way our students are suffering because of this success.

The question is this: if we are not serving everyone that could benefit from using the writing center, are we truly successful? If first-year students don't make use of our services in the "traditional" way (making an appointment), then do we just follow our own Prime Directive and leave them alone? In response to our findings, we had to rethink how we reach out to students, especially first-years who need more encouragement than other groups. To reach these students, we had to widen our approach beyond the 30-minute, make-an-appointment model, and do so without an increase in budget or staff.

In the spring of 2009, I channeled my inner Captain Kirk and decided our decrease in first-year visits warranted some meddling. A few months later, we started a new program specifically for the Freshmen Composition students. Since the appointment system was not working, we opened up a three-hour block of time one afternoon a week just for these students. Our decision to focus on Freshmen Composition was purely practical. In three hours, with what we assumed would be a large group, there was simply no way only two or three consultants would be able to handle a wide variety of writing projects. All Freshman Composition classes at UW follow the same syllabus, so we knew we'd be able to focus on one type of writing each week. Because the classes are taught solely in the English department, informing instructors and students of the new program would be fairly simple. For the first semester, we visited almost every composition class with a presentation about the program, which we dubbed "Wednesday Writing

Workshop." Our public relations blitz put a face to the program and forced students to feel specifically invited to come to the center. For the first two weeks, we didn't have much business, but as the semester progressed, we got busy. One day during workshop we helped twenty-four students!

Our workshop model has little resemblance to the traditional one-on-one appointment. Students may come in at any time during the three-hour block; they may come in groups or alone, and they may stay for as little or as much time as they like. Obviously, when we have a large number of students in the room, we can't engage in the traditional one-on-one session, so we have devised a different system. When students enter, one of the consultants greets them, asks them to sign in, and then assigns them to a group working on the same issues as the student—thesis statement, developing ideas, paragraphing, etc. Our consultants then "work the room," moving from table to table, sitting down with a student for a few minutes at a time, offering suggestions and often giving mini assignments. For example, after talking to a student for a few minutes about his/her thesis statement, I might say, "Okay, now that you have a thesis you like, make a list of five reasons that support that thesis and I'll be back in ten minutes." We also encourage students to help one another and to discuss what they are working on while we are away from their table. What we've observed so far is that students quickly adapt to being of a writing community and even learn they can become better writers by discussing their ideas with others. When they are left on their own for a few minutes, we see them becoming better problem solvers, and they are secure in the knowledge there is an "expert" in the room if they get stuck.

During that first semester, we recorded 90 visits by Freshmen Composition students. Spring 2010 showed 61 visits, and fall 2010, 108 visits. Our workshop has become a writing studio for many students. They bring their laptops, find their favorite chair or corner, and they just write. Sometimes they ask for assistance, but often they come in to work on their own. Students like having a quiet place where they can concentrate on their writing and feel more comfortable knowing assistance is available if needed.

Many pencil our workshop into their schedules. Another positive, not directly related to writing, is that students become better at planning ahead, whether that means starting a writing project earlier, or getting the help they need, when they need it.

We continue to try different formats, schedules, and days of the week to increase participation. Ultimately, we would like to expand beyond composition students; it is important to find ways to invite all first-years into the Writing Center, no matter what the writing project. If the invitation means some slight *meddling*, then Captain Kirk was right: it is simply what we have to do. In order to affect the best outcome, sometimes the best strategy is to interfere.

Work Cited

“Student Enrollment Continues to Grow at UW.” *University of Wyoming*. University of Wyoming, 4 Mar. 2010. Web. 12 Feb. 2011.